

THE GIFTED MR. BIMBLE

Drawing by Irma Dérèmeaux

BY GLENMORE DAVIS



"An' to China we owe the sole, single, an' only thing that makes doctors an' surgeons set up an' take notice."

IT was hot, goodness knows! but something in the air—the dislocated fringe of a wind from Medicine Hat, maybe—made us throw our shoulders back as we walked across the railroad station and chucked our valises on top of the hotel bus. McCann took a full breath and gazed toward what he thought was the north.

"And this is the sixteenth of October!" he sighed. "We're a fine pair of Marco Polos!"

I squeezed into a seat between him and a man with several chins. I asked Jack to cheer up. I told him the season was almost over.

"The town of Okra!" he sighed again. "Sounds like a soup!"

"And looks like the deserted village," I agreed. "But Sam Harkins will pry loose the usual thousand dollars' profit tomorrow. Hello! What's that?"

A string of one-sheet posters half concealed a lot of circus billing on a barn. They were too far away to be read distinctly from a bouncing bus.

"You can search me," said McCann. "Suppose another show has covered our paper?"

The perspiring fat man knew the answer. "Nope. Temperance convention," he volunteered. "State's dry as a bone. Wets've started a movement to reverse conditions. Drys tryin' to kill it before it gets head-way. Hold convention here tomorrow afternoon. Teetotalers from all over the country. Grabbed all rooms in hotels and boarding houses. State Undertakers' convention here too. Queer combination, ain't it? Perfect hogs for beds, undertakers. You boys with circus? Thought so. Got rooms engaged? Me too. Lucky. Queer country, ain't it?"

McCann beat me in allowing that it was.

"See that tent?" the fat man panted, and nodded straight ahead. "That's where the drys convene tomorrow. Some hall! Seats five thousand. It'll be

packed. Kill the circus sure. Here's our Waldorf-Astoria. Whew! Hot, ain't it?"

WE piled out, sent our baggage to the room, and sauntered forth to take a look at the town. Less than a week before we had played "day and date" with the Wells & Howe Circus, and only by a trick had we been able to pack Harkins' tents. Fighting a rival circus was one thing, and fighting a State temperance movement and an undertakers' convention looked like at least half a dozen others. Once I had been business manager of a musical comedy company which encountered the undertaker part of this coalition; but with a State temperance conference as an added starter, I was beaten before I started. Everywhere—on trees, barns, fences, wagons, telegraph poles, and even houses—we saw posters and placards announcing the grand rally at Okra next day. Two-thirty was the hour of the big meeting—precisely the time of our afternoon show. Another antidrink talkfest was billed for eight p. m.—exactly the minute our evening performance was due to start. Across the streets huge banners shouted:

WELCOME, DRYS!

Another, which half hid the town firehouse, screamed:
BE NOT AMONG WINE BIBBERS!

The streets were crowded with solemn looking men in store clothes. Most of them wore white ribbons as boutonnières or hatbands. The rest displayed on their chests badges decorated with the figure of a coffin and the letters S. U. A. It required no puzzle expert to elaborate this into "State Undertakers' Association." Handbills littered the streets. McCann plucked one from a heap. It asked, "Why Spend Anywhere from \$75 to \$400 on a Funeral?" and went on, "When Looking for a Fine, High Class, Dressy Interment Write, 'Phone, or Call on Hathaway. A Complete Funeral for \$19.75! Beats Anything You can get Elsewhere for

\$100! Patronize Home Industries! Not a Member of the Trust!"

"Didn't think Okra could be so gay," said Jack.

"Never mind Okra," said I. "Think of us!"

McCann tossed the handbill into the street, and we ambled along in silence, looking in vain for a sign of excitement in favor of the show I was paid to advertise. An occasional banner or eight-sheet was the only stuff of ours discernible. All the lithographs had been covered. Jack grunted something about having to hand it to whoever turned the trick, and I came across with the statement that at last we had run across a hurdle that could not be jumped. Despite the note of pessimism that once in awhile was apparent in his speech, my friend McCann was by nature an optimist and a scrapper. Besides, he was an enthusiastic admirer of one Samuel Harkins.

"Hold on," said he and stopped in front of a shop window filled with grape juice, sarsaparilla, and ginger ale. "There must be something we can do."

"Name it!" was my sarcastic suggestion. "What's going to break up these two conventions in time to pack a circus tent?"

"Hoang Ho!"

I GLARED at McCann to see if he was kidding, and found him looking at me to see if I was crazy. "What?" we snarled simultaneously. We were both getting peeved.

"Hoang Ho!" came the answer again.

The voice sounded from the rear. Whirling round, we saw several women and men gazing intently at the exhilarating display of third quenchers in the window. I was still under the impression that McCann had uttered the irrelevant remark, and he probably had the same unworthy thought about me. During the seconds we were studying the funeral backs of the teetotaler Okraites, each of us trying to think of something in-